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Assessment innovation and student experience: a new assessment challenge and call for a multi-perspective approach to assessment research

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The impact of innovative assessment on student experience in higher education is a neglected research topic. This represents an important gap in the literature-given debate around the marketisation of higher education, international focus on student satisfaction measurement tools and political calls to put students at the heart of higher education in the UK. This paper reports on qualitative findings from a research project examining the impact of assessment preferences and familiarity on student attainment and experience. It argues that innovation is defined by the student, shaped by diverse assessment experiences and preferences, and therefore its impact is difficult to predict. It proposes that future innovations must explore assessment choice mechanisms which allow students to shape their own assessments. Cultural change and staff development will be required to achieve this. To be accepted, assessment for student experience must be viewed as a complementary layer within a complex multi-perspective model of assessment, which also embraces assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment for lifelong learning. Further research is required to build a meta-theory of assessment to enhance the synergies between these alternative approaches and minimise the tensions between them.

Keywords: assessment; innovation; student experience; learning; choice; emotion

Introduction

The recognition that assessment has a significant impact on ‘what, how and how much students study’ (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 3) lies behind developments in assessment methodology and an ‘expanding repertoire’ (Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens 2005, 332) of ‘alternative assessment methods’ (335). While research has examined how these innovative methods of assessment impact on approaches to learning, less attention has been given to the impact on student affect and the overall student experience. This is an important limitation, given the pressures in UK higher education to maximise student satisfaction and deliver positive scores in the National Student Survey (NSS) (Brown 2011; Buckley 2012). However, ‘a pattern of enhanced marketisation has been a global phenomenon’ (Foskett 2011, 29), with similar measures of student satisfaction receiving growing attention internationally (Chalmers 2007; Richardson 2005). These include the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) in Australia and the National Survey of Student Engagement in the

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USA and Canada. Therefore, while this study has a UK focus the findings have international implications (Chalmers 2007).

The impact of assessment strategies on student experience is now a key area of concern for all higher education institutions, amid claims that ‘assessment and feedback are not only central to learning but also to the student experience’ (Taras 2002, 503). In the UK, student experience has been given renewed political importance through government education policy focused on building a competitive market place, designed to improve the quality and efficiency of higher education. Institutions are expected to compete for student numbers and the income attached to them by placing them ‘at the heart of the system’ (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2011), by continuously improving ‘the design and content of courses and the quality of students’ academic experience’ (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012, 13). Alongside the introduction of tuition fees and variable tuition costs in the UK in 2006–2007 (Gov.UK 2012), this has reinforced the contentious labelling of students as customers or consumers (Carlson and Fleisher 2002). This has been driven by a combination of cultural, social, economic and political change (Williams 2013), a vibrant industry of university league tables and a ‘growing culture of complaint’ and ‘defensive education’ where ‘courses, especially ones that do not rate highly in student surveys, are modified and made customer friendly’ (Furedi 2011, 3).

However, there are still gaps in the research on student preferences and the impact of assessment methods on student experience (Bartram and Bailey 2010), which makes it difficult to explore whether assessment innovations are well received. This gives possible cause for concern given claims that assessment plays a ‘subtle, complex, and enormously important role in the students’ experience of learning’ (Maclellan 2001, 308), and that assessment is still an aspect of the student experience which students are least satisfied with (Higher Education Academy 2012a; Price et al. 2011). It is time to take stock of developments in assessment methodology to review what progress has been made and analyse what students perceive to be innovative in assessment.

This paper aims to address these questions with the assistance of key findings from the qualitative phase of a multi-method research project on assessment. The aim of the project was to explore the impact of innovative assessment practices on student experience, with a focus on the role of assessment familiarity and preferences in assessment satisfaction and the overall student experience. The findings will be used to discuss the practical and research challenges relating to assessment and assessment innovation presented by the need to enhance student experience.

Innovative assessment
Taras (2002) posits that it is now almost essential to develop innovative assessments in higher education, and the literature on innovative assessment in the UK has been described as ‘large and buoyant as well as richly varied and diffuse’ (Hounsell et al. 2007, 66). Increase in assessment innovation has also been reported in the USA, Australia and New Zealand (Clegg and Bryan 2006). Yet, the definition of innovative assessment remains unclear, ‘notoriously tricky’ and a ‘slippery notion’ (Hounsell et al. 2007, 4). It is complicated by a range of confusing terminology, including alternative, performance, informal, authentic, direct, constructive, embedded and balanced assessment (Birrenbaum 1996; Maclellan 2004). The degree of
innovativeness also appears to be transitory and differs from one discipline to another (Hounsell et al. 2007). Assessment innovations may relate to changes in ‘timing, content, choice of assessment methods, the balance between individual and collaborative work, and the balance between assessing performance and assessing evidence’ (Race 1999, 65). No wonder then that Hounsell et al. (2007, 16) adopted a broad definition in their literature search, ‘that which is novel in the eyes of its begetters and beholders and entails more than a minor or trivial adjustment or modification’. This presents interesting issues when considering the impact of assessment innovation on the experience of the beholders, higher education students.

The begetters of innovation

The begetters of innovative assessment have been influenced by a sense of dissatisfaction with conventional assessment practices from both tutors and students (McDowell and Sambell 1999), and criticisms of the state of assessment methodology in higher education (Carless 2007; Knight 2002; Price et al. 2011): ‘From student satisfaction surveys to Select Committee reports, there is firm evidence that assessment is not successfully meeting the needs of students, employers, politicians or the public in general’ (Higher Education Academy 2012a, 7).

One of the most reported influences on assessment innovation has been the drive towards assessment for learning (Boud et al. 2010; Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2013). New assessment methods have been targeted at constructive alignment of assessment, learning opportunities and learning outcomes (Biggs and Tang 2011; Rust 2002). Innovations aim to shift students from surface approaches to learning, associated with conventional assessment methods, towards deeper levels of processing (Marton and Säljo 2005; Rust 2002). However, the actual impact of innovative assessment on student learning is difficult to predict. Prior experiences of assessment methods may shape the way a student perceives and interprets the current task. Contradictions in instructions on assessment, compared with those received earlier in a programme of study, may cause confusion as students attempt to ‘make sense of what kind of task they have been set … and what would count as a “good” attempt at it’ (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 21). New assessments presented in unfamiliar ways increase extraneous cognitive load ‘associated with a diversion of cognitive resources to activities that are irrelevant to learning’ (Kalyuga 2011, 3). This leaves less working memory capacity to cope with the complexity of the new learning material itself (intrinsic cognitive load), or with the helpful learning activities associated with processing that material into manageable chunks or schema in long-term memory (germane cognitive load). A wide range of different types of assessments also make it difficult for students to apply latent learning from feedback on earlier assessed work.

The need to assess the type of learning and employment skills and abilities demanded from graduates to survive in the real world (Clegg and Bryan 2006; Higher Education Academy 2012a; McDowell and Sambell 1999) has also influenced assessment innovation. A relatively new focus has been on the need to assess the development of transferable and vocational skills (Maclellan 2004), and skills underpinning the principles of lifelong (Boud and Falchikov 2006; Rust 2002) and reflective learning. This has been associated with a drive to develop authentic or meaningful assessments within a realistic context (McDowell and Sambell 1999),
particularly for students seeking professional qualifications and skills as part of their study (Clegg and Bryan 2006).

However, not all innovations have been learning-focused. On a more practical level, changes have been driven by developments in technological capabilities and, on a more negative note, by the need to counteract plagiarism. Many see assessment innovation as a practical response to resource constraints as class sizes, student to staff ratios and student diversity have increased, and programmes have become more modularised (Higher Education Academy 2012a). Demands to satisfy the diverse needs of a wide range of stakeholders in higher education have also played an important role (Race 1999). In particular, attempts to respond to the reported, and perhaps contradictory, role change for students into customers (Acevedo 2011; Carlson and Fleisher 2002) and partners in higher education (Boud et al. 2010; Buckley 2012) have driven innovation to increase student participation in assessment (Taras 2002). However, tutors must continue to ensure that innovations produce reliable assessment outcomes to fulfil ‘feedout’ functions (Knight 2002, 276), such as certifying attainment for entry to and progression through professional bodies, evidencing achievement of political agendas and justification of public expenditure (Maclellan 2004).

The beholders of innovation

A positive reaction from students towards innovative assessment is far from guaranteed. Tutors may struggle with the introduction of new learning-focused assessment methods designed to ‘capture sufficient study time’ (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 12), especially if students underestimate the effort required to complete a programme of study (Glynn, Aultman, and Owens 2005). Despite the limitations of more conventional assessment methods and the learning benefits of innovative approaches, students are ‘instinctively wary of approaches with which they are not familiar or that might be more demanding ... unhappy about assessment methods where the outcomes might be less predictable’ (Gibbs 2006, 20). The challenge is heightened with students who appear more interested in the career and pay increases that may be won from enhanced qualifications, rather than engaging with the learning process and intellectual pursuit itself (Zell 2001).

Being assessed is also emotional (Clegg and Bryan 2006; Falchikov and Boud 2007). Workload associated with assessment activity has been shown to impact on student mood (Coutts, Gilleard, and Baglin 2011). In turn this can affect cognitive processes associated with learning (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 2012). Students may experience dissatisfaction with assessment where it is perceived to impact negatively on their ability to self-manage their own workload; motivational problems have been highlighted where assessment creates competition amongst students which deters them from working together effectively; confusion and low morale may result from poor alignment of assessment strategies with course content (Drew 2001, 319). Panton (2004) raises concerns with the portrayal of students as vulnerable and unable to cope with academic pressures. Emotional response should not automatically be viewed as a problem that needs to be fixed. The impact of anxiety, for example, can be ambiguous, damaging performance in some but facilitating it in others. However, students do seek assessment methods that reduce anxiety and stress (van de Watering et al. 2008), and ‘affect and emotions are recognized as being of critical importance for students’ academic learning, achievement, personality, development and health’ (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 2012, 260). Yet, there are
significant gaps in research about their impact in higher education (Pekrun 2005), and how innovative assessment may impact on these outcomes and on student experience as a whole.

The impact of innovative assessment on international students may be even more pronounced. Internationalisation continues as a key focus in UK higher education institutions (Higher Education Academy 2012b). The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA 2013), the UK’s national advisory body for international students, reported a 2% increase in international higher education students in the UK in 2011–2012 compared with 2010–2011. This is despite the introduction of tougher visa entry requirements and restricted work entitlements for students entering the UK, and the removal of a popular entitlement to remain in the UK to work after completion of a period of study (UK Homeoffice 2011). These students experience transitional pressures which can result in culture shock (Oberg 1960), and evidence of this has been identified in assessment performance. This shock comes from ‘the natural difficulties posed by a new environment causing a period of disorientation, insecurity and incomprehension that may last for weeks, months or even longer’ (Kelly and Moogan 2012, 27). The period of adjustment may put the international student at a disadvantage and could be exacerbated by assessment variety. This has led to a call for the design of more culturally responsive assessment mechanisms to help level the assessment playing field (Johnston 2010). Bearing in mind warnings that the ‘multiple complexities lived by student cohorts’ extend to home students as well (Welikala 2013, 1), this is also likely to assist other minority student groups attracted back to higher education through the widening participation agenda.

To understand the impact of innovative assessment on students we must build a better understanding of the students experiencing them. However, comparatively little is known about student preferences (Bartram and Bailey 2010; Furnham, Batey, and Martin 2011), particularly how they develop, may change over time and impact on learning outcomes (van de Watering et al. 2008). It is also unclear how prior assessment experiences may influence these preferences. These would appear to be significant gaps in the research literature if tutors are to fully understand how to develop assessment processes to get the best out of every student. Sambell and McDowell (1998) identified that students being exposed to new forms of assessment recognised changes in the process but interpreted these in different ways. Therefore, the strength of preference for different methods is not the same for all students (Furnham, Batey, and Martin 2011). Preferences may be influenced by intelligence, personality and approach to learning (Bartram and Bailey 2010), test anxiety and gender (van de Watering et al. 2008). The impact of alternative methods of assessment will vary as students interpret and act on messages about assessment in different ways (Sambell and McDowell 1998), and make choices about how to react or behave in relation to those perceptions (Macelllan 2001). This reaction to assessment is influenced not only by subject content, but by the individual’s prior educational and assessment experiences, ‘motivations and orientations to study’ (Sambell and McDowell 1998, 395). Thus, assessment familiarity may play a role in the development of assessment preferences.

**Methodology**

The research reported in this paper took the form of a case study in the Business School of a higher education institution which gained university status in 1992. This
was considered an appropriate location, given the emphasis on learning, teaching and assessment quality in the university, and the volume of innovative assessment literature in the field of business, management, accountancy and finance (Hounsell et al. 2007). Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the Business School’s research ethics committee before commencing the recruitment of research participants. The module leaders of three core undergraduate modules (first, second and third years) and one full-time postgraduate module were provided with briefing letters on the project, and asked to issue a request for volunteers to take part in the interviews. Contact details and country of origin information were collected, from which purposive sampling was used to select 30 participants from a range of international backgrounds.

This small, purposive sample has limitations in terms of generalising results to other populations. It was used, however, to generate an information-rich case study capturing the diversity of student assessment experiences and preferences from different nationalities in response to the research questions, and was appropriate for the exploratory nature of the research project. All participants provided informed consent and could withdraw their data from the research process after the interview was concluded. The final sample included four students from the United Kingdom and 26 students from 19 other countries throughout Europe, Africa and Asia. Data were gathered from participants through semi-structured interviews designed around the research questions. The results reported here relate to three research questions: What is innovative assessment? What affective impacts do innovative assessments have on students? How do students’ reactions to innovative assessments impact on overall student experience?

Questions around the affective impact of assessment were introduced in response to criticisms of the cognitive orientation of more formal measures of student experience, such as the NSS and the CEQ (White 2013). The exclusion of affective measures could be regarded as a significant omission, given the impact that emotion is now considered to have on behavioural intentions, actions and outcomes, such as academic engagement, adjustment, performance and student health and well-being (Saklofske et al. 2012). However, it is recognised that the task of assessing emotion or mood through self-report requires participants to be aware of and capable of assessing their own internal moods accurately, and reporting them honestly, which can be problematic (Watson and Clark 1997). This self report approach may therefore be regarded as a further limitation in the adopted methodology.

All interviews were fully transcribed and imported into NVivo software for analysis to allow rigorous interrogation of the data (Crowley, Harre, and Tagg 2002). The analysis was structured around a priori coding based on the research questions. As the coding process developed this structure was expanded with a posteriori codes which emerged from the data. The modelling function within the software was used to assist the development of thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report on patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This function provides flexibility that can be inhibited by the rigidity of the node tree structure in NVivo (Crowley, Harre, and Tagg 2002). This helped to avoid the researcher becoming so close to the data that the larger picture of the research context becomes lost. The different functions in the software enable ‘closeness for familiarity and appreciation of subtle difference, but distance for abstraction and synthesis’ (Bazeley 2007, 8).

The quantitative phase of the project will be used to test for statistical relationships between identified variables. The qualitative methodology complemented this
approach and was considered appropriate given the individual way in which students interpret their experiences of change (Sambell and McDowell 1998). While problems in generalising findings to other student cohorts exist, this is a valid methodology for surfacing differences in experience which lie at the heart of the research questions. This approach allows more detailed exploration of the different choices each student makes about how they react to novel assessment experiences, and acknowledges the individual and personal nature of these (Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens 2005).

Findings and discussion

**What is innovative assessment?**

The concept of innovative assessment is poorly defined in the academic literature: however, at a simple level, it relates to any assessment which is new, original or novel. From the student’s perspective, or the eye of the beholder (Hounsell et al. 2007), this depends on educational and assessment background. To understand what is perceived as innovative, tutors must analyse each student’s assessment background to establish what methods they are familiar with, and which will be defined as novel. When asked about their prior assessment experiences to explore assessment familiarity, however, participants tended to talk more naturally about innovation in assessment criteria than assessment methods. These experiences emerged unprompted by participants during the interviews, perhaps suggesting they were of greater concern or importance to students. A number of international students were familiar with relatively simple criteria associated with surface-level learning, such as memorisation of facts and replication of materials from textbooks or lecturer notes. This suggested familiarity with an assessment of learning approach associated with more conventional assessment methods:

If you have the answer which is in the book you get full marks. (postgraduate student, India)

In their current experiences, however, students talked about a wide range of new criteria and unfamiliar expectations to produce work which challenged the views presented in lectures and in their reading. They were surprised by demands associated with assessment for learning to demonstrate critical thinking and evaluation in their work. The use and synthesis of a wide mix of literature, including current sources, demonstrated through accurate referencing was also a novel experience for many. In summary, many aspects of assessment presented new experiences for the students in this sample:

When we were back home in Nigeria writing, writing, putting some things together but here structure counts, referencing counts, critical thinking counts, all of them counts … I won’t say it’s mission impossible but! (postgraduate student, Nigeria)

Innovative assessment methods may represent just a small part in the experience of a much larger transition:

The whole education system is different and we just need to fit in. (postgraduate student, West Indies)
This might go some way to explain why accurately establishing a student’s prior experiences of assessment methods proved to be far from straightforward. Mirroring previous studies (Bartram and Bailey 2010), most students initially found it difficult to conceptualise their experiences beyond a simple dichotomy of examinations and assignments. With direction, however, more detailed accounts emerged reflecting the expanding repertoire of assessments reported in the literature (Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens 2005), although levels of familiarity with different methods varied. Many international students reported experiencing very little assessment variety before commencing their current study. Examination-dominated assessment strategies were prevalent in interviews with students from India, Cyprus, Poland, Nigeria and the Czech Republic. For these students any assessment other than an examination will be perceived as innovative:

I don’t think we have any exams this semester which is different, having to be graded without exams, it’s a strange concept … I don’t think I’ve ever heard of an assessment without exams. (postgraduate student, Nigeria)

However, tutors must guard against making assumptions about student assessment experience based on simplified international stereotypes. While there are broad themes in the accounts of assessment familiarity from different countries similar to those found in other research (Bartram and Bailey 2010; Furnham, Batey, and Martin 2011), variations also exist. A respondent from Kenya explained how assessment strategies changed when she moved from a local system of education to a UK-based system within the country. Thus, generalising a Kenyan student’s educational experience is likely to be problematic. Similarly, one UK undergraduate reported a less conventional assessment experience gained from homeschooling and a move into a Steiner Waldorf education system in the UK.

Even within the UK university system students reported differences in assessment experiences. For example, one participant described a shift from a very conventional examination-based assessment process in one university to an assignment-, practical- and reflective-based assessment process in another. This change in assessment methodology also appeared to be associated with a change in subject discipline:

I would say it was different to my undergraduate studies where it was more of an academic assignment … when I did do assignments it was drawing on the experiences that I’d actually had within the classroom and I was also assessed by being observed too. (postgraduate student, UK)

Problems may arise if tutors make assumptions about what individual students will find innovative. Findings appear to confirm the view that ‘students’ perceptions of assessment and their accompanying approaches to learning are very personal and individual constructions of the learner’ (Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens 2005, 343). The perception of the individual student plays a key role in the definition of innovation. Innovation cannot be defined by the tutor or literature alone. It is shaped by the student’s own prior assessment experiences, which the tutor must understand if they are to anticipate and support students through difficulties when undertaking new methods of assessment. This suggests that, in an ideal world, tutors should enter into dialogue with individual students to fully understand their assessment backgrounds. This is a Utopia tutors can surely only dream of, particularly when working with
large cohorts. However, given the range of factors that can influence student perceptions of assessment, leaving the tutor alone to accommodate the range of interests involved could be problematic.

**How does innovative assessment impact on the student experience?**

To understand what the impact of innovative assessment will be, tutors must identify each student’s assessment preferences in order to establish which methods may have the most favourable impact on their experience as a student. Given the individual nature of assessment experiences, it is perhaps unsurprising to find the impact of different methods varied from one student to another. Whilst one student found group work ‘fun’ for example, others found it frustrating:

> The hardest thing of a group presentation is the feeling of carrying a lot of people through. It becomes so emotionally draining … it’s kind of frustrating that they’re going to be given the same grade as you are and you know that they’re not deserving of it. (postgraduate student, UK)

Similarly, while one student described reflective writing as ‘different’, ‘hard’ and something they did not ‘enjoy much’, a number were much more positive. One suggested it should ‘always be offered to students’ to help learning through self-evaluation:

> I haven’t done reflections before. So the reflection element I find very interesting because it gives me a chance to not only look back at the work that I’ve done but at how it has influenced my way of thinking. (postgraduate, West Indies)

The constructed nature of the assessment experience is evident here, influencing different perceptions of new assessment mechanisms. Whilst diverse assessment backgrounds are likely to contribute to this, there was little qualitative evidence to suggest that students preferred methods they were already familiar with. Participants actually expressed preferences for reflective writing, management reports and presentations, despite having no experience of these before. The quantitative data need to be explored more thoroughly to confirm the relationship between innovative assessments and preferences, but perhaps assessment innovation acts as a refreshing change to both tutor and student.

Evidence emerged more strongly of underlying principles of assessment which students like or dislike. These may be useful in helping tutors to anticipate how students will feel about the introduction of innovative assessment methods. Students preferred assessment which reflected ‘real life’ or the world of work, for example. This was often linked to practical and project type assessments, and was a key in influencing views on group-based assessments and presentations:

> I feel like it can prepare you for the work environment cos you don’t wanna feel like as we’re lab rats and you come out of that lab and you don’t know what to do. (postgraduate student, Cyprus)

A second positive theme related to opportunities to receive detailed feedback from tutors:
The assessment that I got good feedback on, I was able to actually sleep the night. Whereas the assessment that I did not get good feedback on, I pretty much was drowning myself in sorrow. (postgraduate student, West Indies)

This is perhaps unsurprising, given extensive research around feedback in the existing literature, and suggestions that it plays a significant role in the assessment experience (Gibbs and Simpson 2004). This was perceived as an important disadvantage to examinations, where students provided negative reports of being allocated a grade with no feedback on why that grade had been given.

While these principles reflect an assessment for learning focus, others emphasised that more conventional concerns with assessment relating to assessment or certification of learning still remain. This approach perpetuates concerns about validity, reliability, grading and fairness. In line with findings in the existing literature (Furnham, Batey, and Martin 2011), for example, preferences for ‘fair’ assessments were evident. This influenced student attitudes to examinations. In contrast to previous findings (Bartram and Bailey 2010), multiple-choice examinations were disliked because of the introduction of ‘luck’ (undergraduate student, Qatar). Students were also more positive about assessment methods that resulted in good grade outcomes. This may link to the contention that students seek assessment methods that are low risk (Bartram and Bailey 2010), particularly for high-stake assessments. Poor grades were often linked to accounts of bad assessment experiences, and appeared to be more significant for some international students than others:

I like understanding what I am doing to the extent of making good grades. And working with people that don’t make good grades, people that don’t care about their grades in a group is so demotivating. (postgraduate student, Nigeria)

This depended upon the perceived need for high grades to secure good employment and to justify investment in an international education. It reinforced that learning is still instrumental for many students (Welikala 2013). This is reminiscent of Carlson and Fleisher’s warning (2002, 1106) that ‘like car and refrigerator customers, student-customers shop for the courses with the least work and the highest grades’. This may result in a shift in preferences stated before grades are released compared to afterwards. This indicates a possible tension between an assessment for learning and assessment of learning approach, which may be difficult to resolve.

Learning

The impact of innovation on learning cannot be neglected in the drive to design satisfying assessments. A positive impact of reflective assessment on learning and lifelong learning appeared to underpin a positive overall student experience. Student learning and satisfaction are not incompatible:

Funnily enough it’s affecting my life now … you are reflecting on your life, on what you have thought about the module and now in real life situation I now have to reflect back and see if I’ve done it all. Its changing my thinking in the sense that each night before I fall asleep I reflect on the day and make feedback and change for another day. Yeah it’s interesting I like it. (postgraduate student, Nigeria)

However, although the degree and length of effected time varied, almost all the participants described some difficulty or challenge getting used to new assessment
methods. The cognitive processes engaged in understanding how to tackle new assessment methods may impact negatively on those directed towards achieving the intended learning outcomes from the assessment. One student explained how time and effort was spent understanding an unfamiliar assessment format, distracting them from developing their understanding of the subject area:

I’d say it definitely did take away from the time that I could have spent engaging with journal articles and reading back on lecture materials. I actually spent a lot of time Googling what is an executive summary even though I had a clear structure that we’d been given, it’s almost like, because its new and you fear it, that’s not enough. (postgraduate student, UK)

This is reminiscent of warnings about assessment methods ‘mis-orienting student effort’ (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 15), and concerns about increased extraneous cognitive load interfering with the processes associated with learning (Kalyuga 2011). Diversion of learning focus was described a number of times in relation to feelings of frustration with group assessments. The development of team and leadership skills may be flawed if this detracts from the intended learning outcome, suggesting another possible tension between assessment for learning and assessment for lifelong learning:

It’s almost as if every group meeting that we had which should have been spent on the presentation looking at what we were doing … was actually spent trying to work with other group members … trying to help them with other things that probably weren’t relevant … I felt as though my learning was just obstructed by whether that was my own emotions or that of other people in the group. (postgraduate student, UK)

While innovative assessment may produce some intended learning benefits, it may also generate negative unintended consequences which undermine this, particularly if it triggers emotional reactions which taint the overall student experience.

**Emotions**

Failure to manage innovation carefully may exert significant affective impacts on the student experience. While accounts of new assessment experiences revealed a wide range of emotional reactions, the preponderance of negative emotions gives reason for concern. Students described feeling disappointed, worried, frightened, confused, stressed, nervous, challenged, afraid, terrified, frustrated, crushed, heartbroken, stupid, agitated, baffled, demotivated, overwhelmed, perturbed, pressured, scared, worried and alone. Although for most, these appeared to be temporary states, for others there were significant if only short-term impacts on the motivations and ability to learn and perform:

I did not learn much because [pause] it was stressful and I was kind of giving up. (undergraduate student, Czech Republic)

Furedi (2011, 4) voices concerns that an emphasis on student satisfaction may erode the quality of education, because students need to be placed under ‘intellectual pressure’ and ‘such an engagement does not always promote customer satisfaction’. However, the findings here suggest an alternative tension, where too much intellectual pressure may itself produce unintended negative learning consequences.
Some students described the feelings as overwhelming; thus, despite Panton’s (2004) concerns about overemphasising the vulnerability of students, tutors need to monitor and ensure that emotional reactions optimise rather than inhibit attainment and satisfaction. Some found the novelty of new assessment interesting or fun, others challenging and stressful. For some students negative emotional reactions to novel assessments appeared to taint the overall student experience, with commitment ramifications. A number of participants described its influence on intentions to quit their course of study. This may reflect the tendency for students to take action to minimise assessment anxiety and stress (van de Watering et al. 2008):

I was thinking oh my god what am I doing here or maybe I should start, go, start with undergraduating here again and then reach to this level … So then I can actually progress to this and then now by the time I would apply, I will do masters I will be actually comfortable with writing assignment. (postgraduate student, Poland)

Some international students described novel assessment as a final straw in an accumulating level of new experiences and emerging culture shock:

First class, first, everything was new, first time in the UK, first time learning environment, new concepts, new style of teaching. That, at that point I truly thought, what am I doing here? I could have gotten a masters back home – why did I choose to come here. (postgraduate student, Nigeria)

Students required to undertake a large degree of change and adaptation may be most susceptible to these negative impacts. Overwhelmed by the demands of fitting into existing systems, they may be disadvantaged by a slower adaptation than others. In some cases the transition period may exceed the length of the period of study (Kelly and Moogan 2012). Overall, these unintended consequences support warnings that innovative assessment should not be seen as a panacea (Maclellan 2004), ‘approached lightly or engaged in for its own sake’ (Race 1999, 57). However, assessment innovations which enable students to divert or postpone some transitional pressures may help to satisfy calls for more culturally responsive assessment mechanisms (Johnston 2010). In turn this may help to maximise assessment satisfaction and the student experience for all. While interest in the field of emotion in education is not new, and is growing, its prevalence in this study gives cause for concern and further investigation.

The new assessment challenge

The diversity of assessment familiarity, preferences and impact found here adds weight to the argument that innovations should continue to focus on enhancing student participation in assessment to cope with the individuality of the assessment experience. However, participation must move beyond simply enhancing student voice around assessment issues through the collection of student feedback or participation in committees. Dialogue must lead to changes in assessment design and the development of mechanisms of choice which enable students to tailor assessment to satisfy their individual needs and preferences. Choice mechanisms would appear to be particularly important to international and widening participation students, if all students are to have an equal opportunity to demonstrate what they know through assessment (Birrenbaum 1996; Johnston 2010).
Further cultural change and staff development is likely to be required to put voice and choice innovations into practice. The role of the student as a customer in higher education has produced contentious debate. Many have resisted calls for students to act as partners in pedagogic decisions which have been the preserve of the academic. Suggestions have been made that a shift in power from tutor to student (Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2013) ‘reduces academics to a service provider’ (Furedi 2011, 4), and can be problematic given that what students want may not be what they need (Carlson and Fleisher 2002). Resistance to calls to put students at the heart of the educational system may also be born out of political acumen. Government policy change could stall, if not completely reverse, the tide of student involvement and participation: ‘Roughly every three years universities in the UK have undergone fundamental ideological and practical upheavals’ (Williams 2013, 43).

A question of balance?

So the question worth asking is ‘ought the satisfaction of the student customer be one of the central objectives of the university?’ (Furedi 2011, 5)

The argument for more student involvement may assume greater legitimacy if a student experience approach to assessment is understood not as a replacement to other assessment roles but as an accretion. A new focus on assessment for student experience should not replace assessment for learning or hold greater significance, but simply develop understanding of assessment as a whole. Each phase, assessment of learning, assessment for learning, assessment for lifelong learning and now assessment for student experience adds a new layer of complexity to the assessment context. Approaching assessment innovation from multiple perspectives may create beneficial synergies which enhance the overall student experience.

Research through a new assessment lens (Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2013), assessment for student experience, may reveal issues which have been overlooked by alternative approaches. Viewed through multiple lenses, neglected issues may acquire heightened importance if they appear in more than one layer, or reveal significant tensions and conflicts between layers. The findings and discussions from this project indicate that this new approach is not without its problems. Research must now focus on closing the gaps in understanding how assessment innovation can develop a positive student experience, and how this adds to and interacts with other assessment objectives. This requires development of a meta-theory of assessment which draws the alternative approaches to assessment together.

Conclusions

In conclusion, from a student perspective innovation is defined by an individual’s assessment experiences and preferences, which are diverse and personal constructs. They, therefore, defy broad generalisations, but on an individual basis are difficult for students to identify and articulate, and for tutors to explore without time-consuming dialogue. This diversity leads to both UK and international students providing mixed accounts of the affective impact of assessment innovation and the adaptation this requires. However, where negative affect is high it can taint the student
experience with consequences for student attrition rates. This is a significant issue which requires renewed attention. Innovations which increase student participation in assessment may help tutors to cope with the diversity of assessment experiences and preferences, but to do so must move beyond simple voice mechanisms. Students require choice in assessment arrangements to create a perception of control in shaping them to their individual aims and objectives. This may be particularly important for international and widening participation students, less familiar with the higher education cultural environment than more conventional students. For these students, coping with novel assessment represents just one part of a much larger and slower process of adaptation.

Even if political opinion about the future of higher education changes again, it seems unlikely that the views of the student will be totally swept aside. However, cultural change and staff development may be required to implement assessment innovations around choice which shift the balance of power between tutor and student. This may be more readily accepted if a focus on the role of assessment in student experience is seen as a complementary role within a complex multi-perspective model of assessment. Growing interest in assessment for experience does not replace or negate previous approaches to assessment, but adds to our overall understanding. Research approached from multiple perspectives can help to highlight effective synergies and complex conflicts, or foreground previously neglected assessment issues such as the emotional impact of assessment. This can help to shape the direction of future research and practice. This suggests an urgent research and practical challenge to explore how these different, conflicting and overlapping roles can be accommodated through further assessment innovations.

Notes on contributor
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References


