

Feedback on Feedback: Reimagining assessment practices to promote inclusion and equity

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University of Cape Town (UCT) Assessment Project: Enabling student success through transformed programmes of assessment

- Funding: University Capacity Development Grant
- Duration: 3 years (2021-2023)
- Project goal: To improve the quality of assessment at undergraduate level across all faculties
- Target group: Academics who carry responsibility for the design of assessment in undergraduate courses and programmes
- Project components:
 - Assessment policy revision
 - Desktop and **institutional research**
 - Development of capacitating resources

UCT Assessment Project

Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching

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- Cheng-Wen Huang
- Soraya Lester

Centre for Educational Assessments

- Sanet Steyn

Faculty of Health Sciences

- Francois Cilliers

The Assessment Framework Working Group

- Faculty and central unit reps

Senate Teaching and Learning Committee

Project Team Members and Stakeholders

- Assessment seen as punitive and something “done to” students
- Assessment motivates learning behaviour leading to instrumental approaches (Rust, 2022)
- Varying perceptions of the purposes of assessment based on prior experiences and cultures
- Students welcome assessment perceived as “fair” and “authentic to real-world experiences”
- Non-learning related factors influence experiences
- Students value choice and flexibility (Bevitt, 2015)
- Students value clarity and transparency e.g rubrics, exemplars
- Students value useful and timely feedback (Boud & Molloy 2013)

Themes framing student experiences of assessment

Seven undergraduate students at UCT participated in 2022:

- Three students → individual interviews
- Four students → two separate focus groups
- Six students → 2nd year of programme
- 1 student → 3rd year of programme
- Subjects included: Engineering, Statistics, Computer Science, Sociology, Film and Media, Medicine, and Physiotherapy
- Online via Teams and in-person on campus
- Approximately 90 minutes or less
- Offered an incentive

Permissions granted by Centre for Higher Education Development
Research Ethics Committee and Department of Student Affairs at UCT

Student Focus Groups

Discussion guide developed by the Project Team:

- Purpose of assessment at UCT
- Assessment experiences at UCT
- Expectations based on school experiences
- Challenges and non-academic factors affecting assessment
- Feedback
- The relationship between assessment and learning
- Improving assessment at UCT

Audio recordings were transcribed → transcripts were anonymised and identifying information was removed → analysed in NVivo using discussion guide and ChatGPT

Student Focus Groups

Managing academic workload

- Social activities
- Household responsibilities
- Commuting
- Employment
- Exercise

Maybe, if someone lives an hour away from campus, so that's two hours gone everyday, which is a great risk for assignments.

Physical and mental health

Mental health. That's a big one. It's the cycle. Especially last year, you feel like you have so much to do but then you start failing. Then you're now stressed that you failed that test and now you can't pass the next test because you have stressed about the past test.

Loadshedding

So I'm a very social person. I love being around my friends, so I usually struggled also balancing that.

Factors Influencing Performance

Assessment literacy moderating assessment performance

- School → university

When I arrived I sort of struggled first. So, I didn't... I wasn't doing well I came in like the first assessment... So that's when I struggled with the... So I didn't really understand the assessment structure, like what's expected out of what type of assessment. So, I wasn't doing well academically, but as we then progressed, that's when I saw oh this folds in here, this folds in here.

Assessment methods

- Online vs in-person assessment
- Group work
- Authentic assessment

The projects. The other thing is I said I came here for the research aspect of UCT and I think that's the closest I got maybe.

Assessment and Learning

Continuous assessment

- Practice and preparation
- Breaking course content down
- Opportunities to succeed
- Frequency and spacing

Yes because I think it would definitely be a big blow because you wouldn't have... You wouldn't see a lot of these questions. You wouldn't know what to expect.

Direction and motivation

- Marks
- Feedback

So from that essay, first one, I was improving weekly by weekly because whenever I'm writing my second essay I check mistakes which they talked about the first essay. When I'm writing third essay, I was checking mistakes which they talked about in the second and first essays.

Assessment and Learning

Purpose of Assessment

- Gauging understanding and retention
- Comparing and screening students
- Certifying knowledge acquisition
- Motivating learning
- Monitoring teaching and learning quality
- ▼ Problematised by students
 - Stress and pressure → punishment

So yeah my understanding is, yeah, it's to assess the depth of understanding of a student and the amount of knowledge they have retained at least in theory. But yeah I've got a whole host of critiques why I don't think that's really happening.

I do know culturally, when it comes to like the university culture there is always this like dread when it comes to assessments and I feel like that kind of like creates this negative energy when it comes to university...

Why are we in a hurry to finish exams and disadvantaging students? I don't know. It feels like a punishment.

Assessment Culture and Climate

Fairness and equity

- Considering diversity when assessing
- Assessment as a social practice

In everything... UCT is biased, I want people with higher marks. I am biased, I want this because the colour is blue and I like it. I want this because that's how... So I feel like GP helps employers to be able to be biased with a guideline.

It's very difficult. Not difficult, but the background are not the same, as what he has mentioned. Some students are not going to be able to study at home.

Yeah it didn't seem to dawn on them what that implied, it seemed to go over their head. This idea that no matter how well students perform the curve must remain the same and a certain percentage must fail. And frankly I think that doing that in a country like ours is [astonished] yeah, not really sure how to put it politely.

Assessment Culture and Climate

- Assessment spread (especially exams)
- Authentic assessment
- Feedback
 - Individual and class level
 - Tutors who understand mistakes and student backgrounds
 - Quantity and turnaround time

And fewer assessments. So each one can be weighted more highly and perhaps even have, be a bit bigger, but yeah the number of assessments is a bit ridiculous at this point.

I feel like the assessor needs to have a sense of.. the tutor needs to be aware of the different structures and the different students that they're assessing and where they're coming from in terms of the experience that they have with the coursework and how they can go about doing those assessments.

Imagining (Smaller) Alternatives

- Opportunities to resubmit and retake
- Means to evaluate marking and request remarks → accountability
- Supplementary exams better supported and held earlier
- More assessment support

But I think we should be able to then say were you satisfied with this assessment, then maybe if a tutor gets a low mark for their assessment, then the lecturer has to look at their work again and see what they did wrong.

So I feel like why can't they just put that supplementary exam now, after examination, if it's like that? And why? A person is still in the mindset of schooling.

So, I think if there was an actual formal class people would be more forthcoming to discuss assignments, maybe problems in the assignment, also if there was an error.

Imagining (Smaller) Alternatives

Exams

- Reduce weighting or increase scope of coursework being assessed

They have to show that this is a whole semester assessment. Someone must hold the question paper and be able to identify this part is linked to this, this part is... In such a way that your whole paper is assessing everything that you did that semester.

Yes, they add unnecessary pressure. Because if someone who gets 65% and someone who gets 71%, do they know... Does the one who got 71 know more than the one who got 65? ... It could just be a difference of the day they wrote the exam.

Imagining (Bigger) Alternatives

Grading system → Pass/Fail or Mastery system

- Employer perceptions
- Validity of marks vs marks for learning

Also, everyone I've spoken to about employment they just say grades don't really matter but grades matter here because you see them.

In short the Mastery System would just be when you've demonstrated mastery of something you progress and this is all done at individual paces. So people who find material in a course easy can complete the whole course very quickly, they do assessments, they show mastery, they move on, and those who struggle take the time they need and they're not permanently punished for it.

Imagining (Bigger) Alternatives

Small sample of student interviews yielded rich insights for the context of assessment practices at UCT

Wider student consultation around elements of proposed policy surfaced **expressions of accountability, useful/timely feedback, improved assessment design** and taking account of **student feedback via course evaluations**.

Underlying theme: **students recognise (un)fair and (in)equitable assessment practices**

Students willing to **give as well as receive feedback** on and about assessment

All conversations around assessment provide new leverage points for change and conversations

Including student perspectives for assessment change