

Optionality in Assessment : what works and what are the barriers?

Findings from Universities in Manchester, York & London

MANCHESTER
1824

The University of Manchester



UNIVERSITY
of York

UCL

Imperial College
London

QAA

Time	What?
1000-1005	Welcome & Introduction
1005-1025	Case studies from the institutions
1025-1100	Discussion 1 - Mentimeter
1100-1115	Break
1115-1130	Presentation : Literature findings
1130-1145	Presentation : Methodology (overview of the 3 stages of data gathering)
1145-1200	Presentation : Survey results
1200-1215	Presentation : interview & Focus group results
1215-1315	Lunch break
1315-1345	Discussion 2 - Padlet
1345-1355	How the Padlet notes will be taken forwards as examples and support for others
1355-1405	Case studies from the institutions
1405-1415	Q&A
1415- 1430	Recommendations for the sector

Welcome



Project Members

Project lead : Miriam Firth (UoM)

Project administrators: Lindsay Dunn, Sam Ward & Ben Murray (UoM)

Project managers: Lara Melville, Fran Edwards & Hannah Brown (UoM)

QAA liaison : Ann Cotterill

UoM (Gabrielle Finn)	York (Jill Webb)	Imperial (Martyn Kingsbury)	UCL (Jesper Hansen)
Miriam Firth Sian Yeowell Andrew Horn Judy Williams Chris Godden Peter Green Sally Hickson Lara Melville Tabita- Gabriela Juravle (Student Partner)	Tracey Lightfoot Jan Ball-Smith Paul Tiffin Jess Penn Caroline Chaffer Tom Cantrell Duncan Jackson Patrick Galimore Claire Hughes	Monika Pazio	Leo Havemann Karen Shackelford- Cesare Marieke Guy

Project Assessment in HE consultant : Simon Walker

Project data analysts: Margarita Panayiotou, Ono Ojobo, and Tom Burgess (all in UoM)

Research questions

1. What are academic & student opinions on the feasibility, practicality, & utility of assessment optionality?
2. What is current practice and opinion on the use of Assessment Optionality across the four institutions?
3. How can we better empower and enable colleagues to design and utilise effective and appropriate options in Assessment?

Assessments: Letting students decide

Context and background

Level 4 module "Literacy, Language and Communication" exploring range of media and forms of communication, but assessment via essay

Level 5 and 6 module "Disability, chronic illness and neurodivergence in contemporary society" attracting higher numbers of SORA students

Introduction of assessment: artefact plus written or spoken (recorded) critical commentary

Artefacts: video, collage, knitting, baking, crocheting, painting, installation,...

Advantages of optionality

sense of agency

avoidance of plagiarism

deeper engagement with module contents and materials

fascinating materials to mark

Challenges of optionality

fairness of equivalencies

creating assessment rubric

commitment and investment for staff and students

supporting self-directed study

More information

Co-authored publication

Brown, N., Morea-Ghergu, D. & Onwuka, N. (2020). Assessments: letting students decide. In: Mawani, S., & Mukadam, A. (eds). *Student Empowerment in Higher Education: Reflecting on Teaching Practice and Learner Engagement*. Vol. 2. Berlin: Logos Verlag. 487-498.

Recordings for UCL

<https://www.nicole-brown.co.uk/?s=letting+students+decide>

Contact

Dr Nicole Brown
Associate Professor

Email
nicole.brown@ucl.ac.uk

Website
www.nicole-brown.co.uk



CHANGE MAKERS

Live, Love, Learn

“Design and carry out a project to explore or change your own experience of happiness. Your project submission should communicate your experience of conducting the project.”

- Set in assignment brief:

- 7 weeks working time
- Submission questionnaire to determine academic merit and process of project
- Weekly check in and feedback from lecturer

- Whole class then negotiate:

- Range of possible projects
- Examples of possible submissions
- Marking criteria that equally value all student projects and determine academic rigor

Negotiated Study

Dr Susan Ramsdale

Unit structure

- 10 credits at Level 5
- 6 sessions
- Offer a flexible mode of study and the opportunity to pursue a topic of relevance to the overall programme
- Facilitate the student's ability to co - develop (with their supervisor) an assignment
- Field specific sessions with supervisor and supervision at individual level

Assessment

- Summative Assessment task to be negotiated with a 2500-word effort equivalent.
- Typical types of assessment choice:
- Essay, PPT, Poster, Writing for Publication, Lit Review
- Topics:
- Varied across the three fields
- Cannot undertake primary research

Optionality in assessment in the BSc Medical Bioscience discovery practical modules Lab Pod 1 and 2

Dr Manuela Mura & Dr Jacqueline Dickson

Term 1 Students make choices

- Theoretical
- Reading of relevant research papers
- Identification of research gap
- Hypothesis formulation
- Scaffolding on preparation: discussion with supervisors, guidance on experimental planning

Research based
modules over 3 terms

Students have the optionality
of choosing an area of
research and experimental
plan to investigate their
hypothesis

Term 2 and 3 Students implement choices

- The project is investigated twice weekly
- Guidance for assessment with eModules
- Followed by Face-to-face interactive sessions

Assessments

Lab Pod 1

Project Oral
presentation

Optionality

- Choice of pathway
- Choice of molecular target
- Choice of presented data/results

Lab Pod 2

Project
experimental
write-up

Optionality

- Choice of research question/pathway
- Choice of presented data/results
- Selection of supporting material

Lab Pod 2

Exam:
Experimental
planning

Optionality

- Formulation of three experimental plans to test a student-devised hypothesis

Discussion 1 : What are your thoughts? 1025-1100hrs





Imperial College
London

Break



Findings from the literature

Untapped potential?

- *"providing students with some variety in assessment encourages **student motivation** and also allows them to showcase **different** skills, exhibit **varied** understandings, and demonstrate a range of learning outcomes"* (Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012)
- Received little attention with the associated literature
 - assessment design (Rideout, 2018)
 - inclusive practice (Tai et al., 2021)
- *"trying harder with more of the same may not always help inclusion"* (Tai, et al., 2021)
- Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB's) are supportive (Walker, 2023, forthcoming)
- New technologies may increase opportunities for assessment choice
- Difficult to get a holistic picture of practice across the sector

Findings from the literature

Optionality Types

- Optionality within assessments
- Choose between different types
- Focus on summative assessment

Potential Benefits

- Student outcomes
- Motivation / engagement/ wellbeing
- Inclusive assessment

Drawbacks/Barriers

- Student -
Equity/ Burden of choice
- Staff -
Additional administrative Work?
- All - need for training

Methodology



Student survey

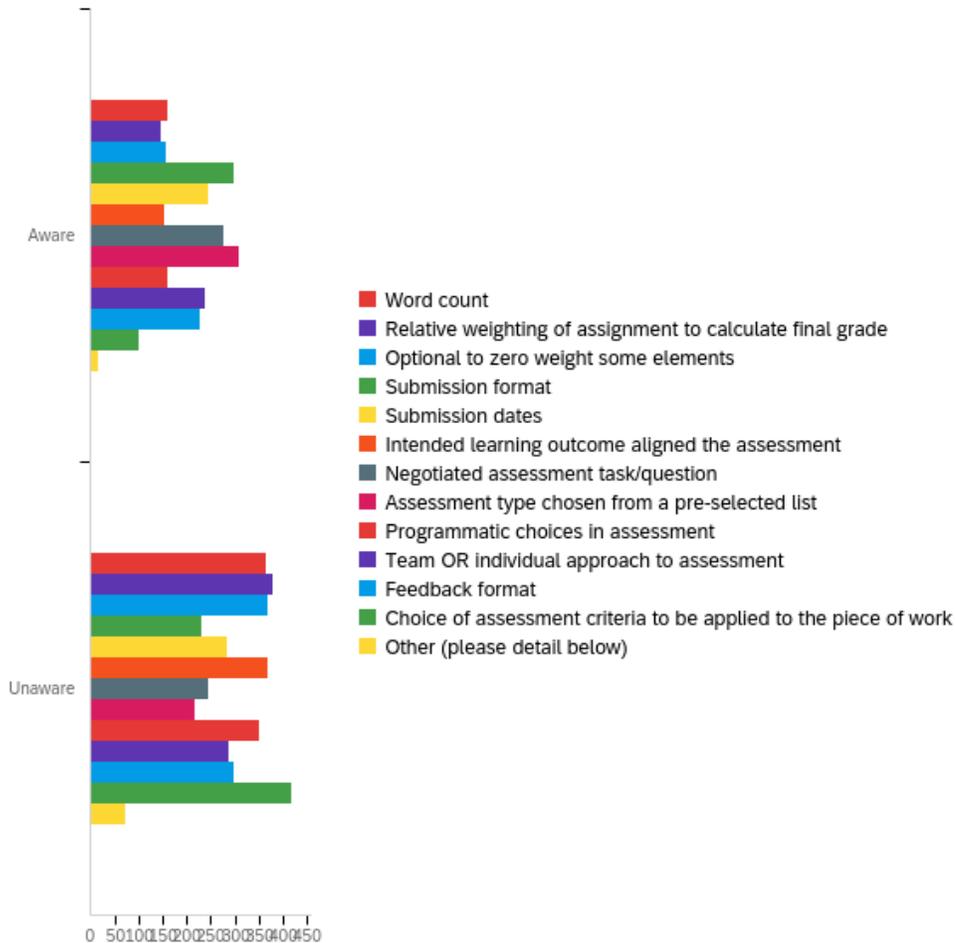


Staff survey



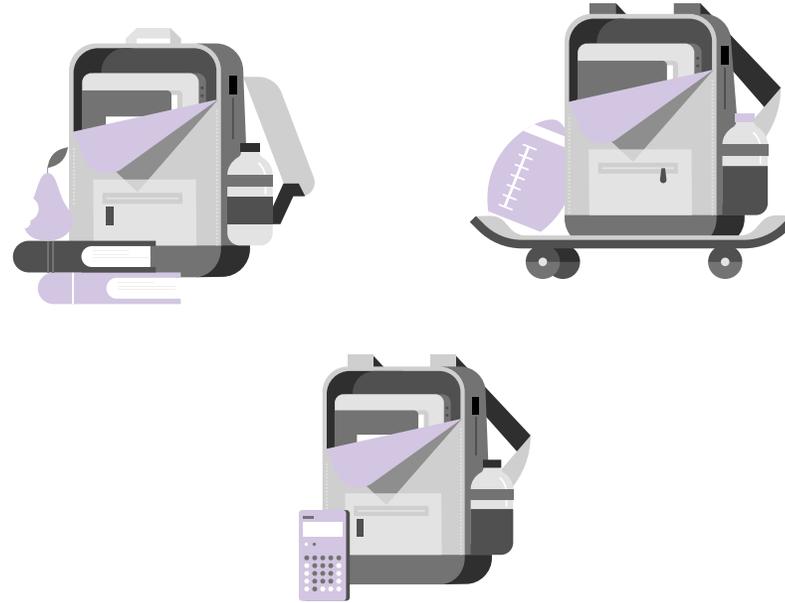
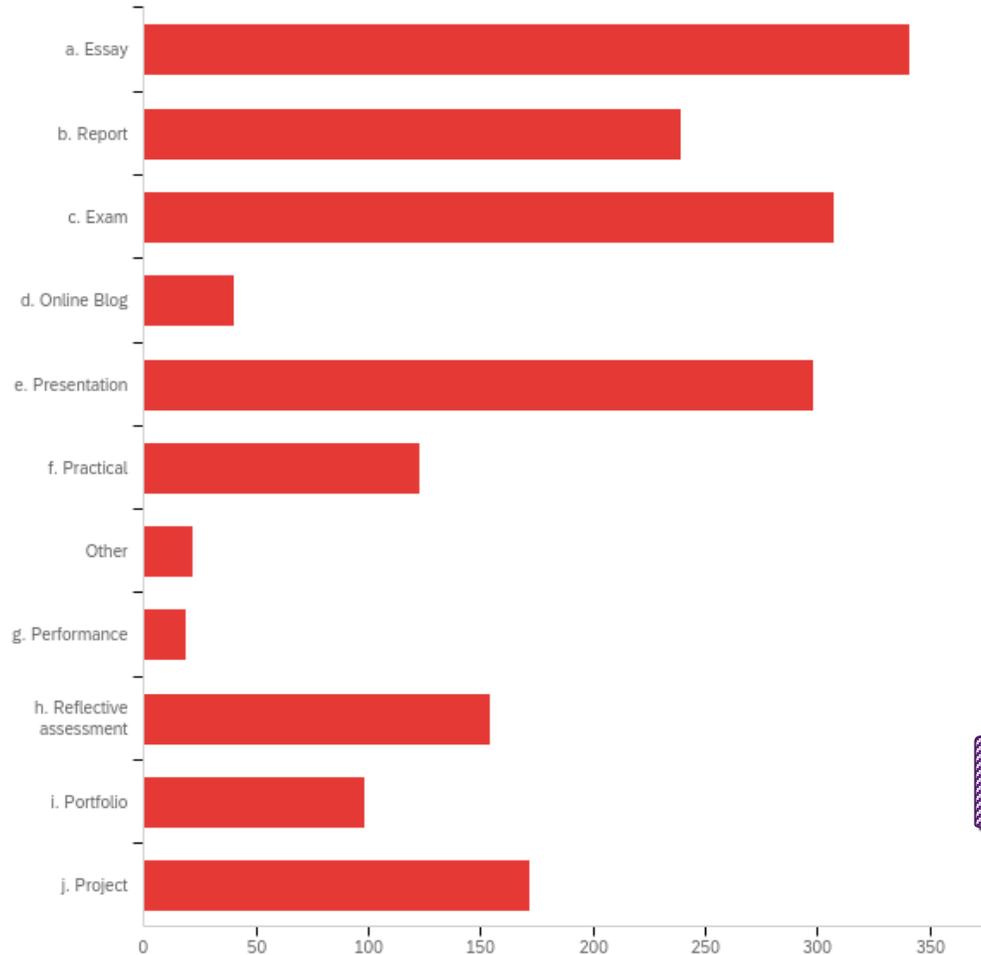
Focus Groups & Interviews

Staff survey results (n=702)



Digital Skills

Student survey results (n=522)



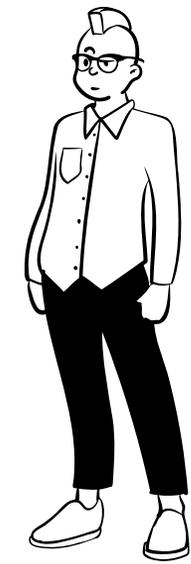
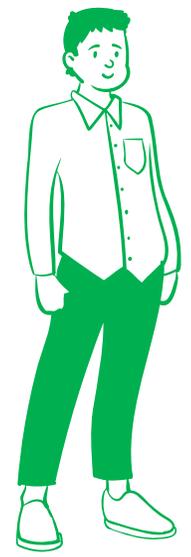
Reduces stress



Comparisons between the surveys

- Staff think there are more barriers than students,
- Students feel there are more benefits than staff,
- All agree on concerns but the benefits outweigh the negatives from a student's perspective.

Narratives from the interviews & focus groups



MANCHESTER
1824
The University of Manchester



Imperial College
London

Lunch



Discussion 2 1230-1300hrs



https://padlet.com/miriam_firth/optionalityinassessment

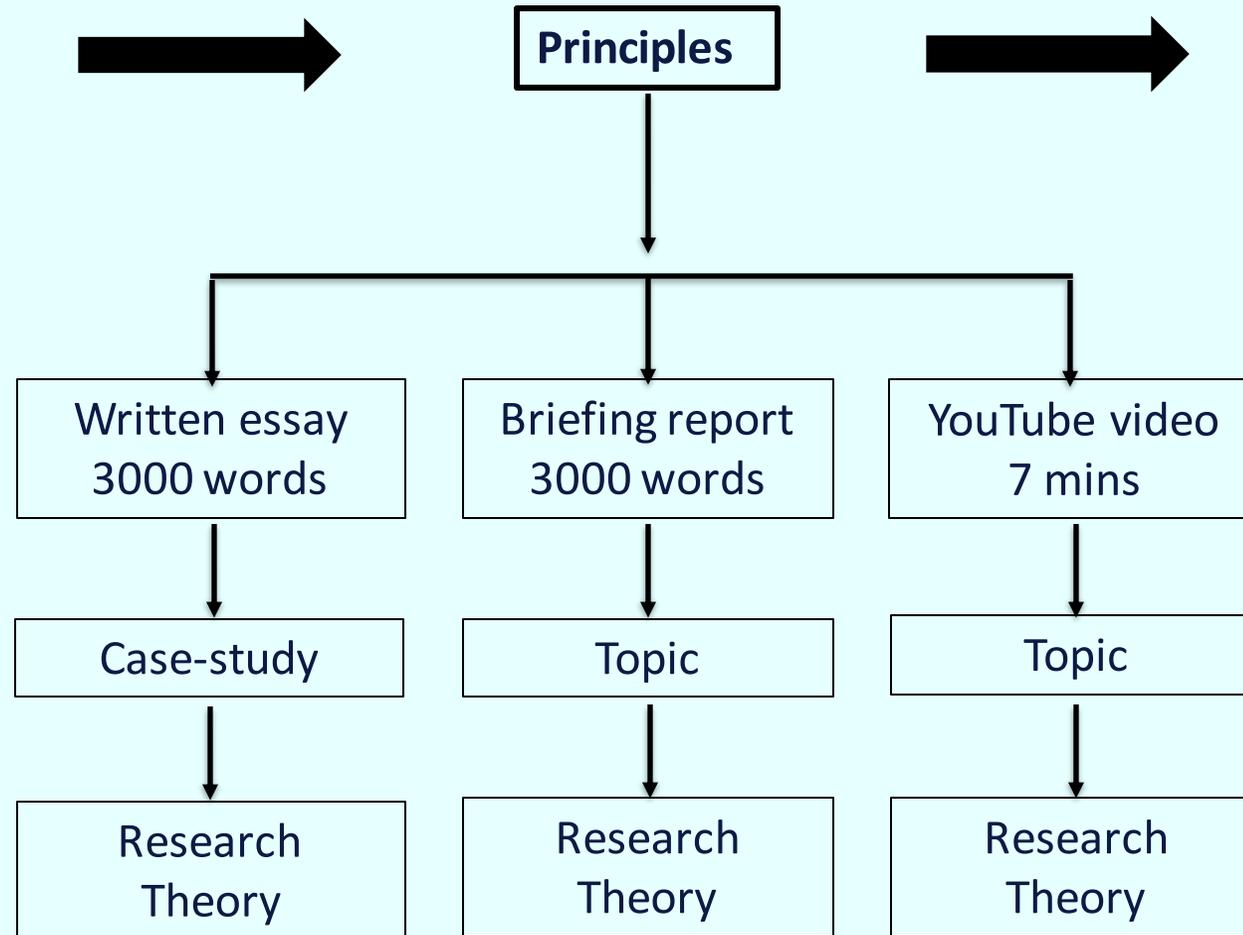
Student choice in assessment: reducing anxiety and unlocking potential

Year 3 UG 10-week Criminal Investigation and Intelligence

Dr Paul McFarlane

Principles:

- Students as partners
- Involved in design
- Aligned to practice



“really liked that I could choose how I was to be assessed”

“felt less anxious about the module assessment”

“being able to choose your assessment should be compulsory in all modules”

“I felt more at ease with the module assessment and didn’t have a last-minute panic”

- MEd in University Learning and Teaching
- Diploma level – Assignment 1: Reading critically in education
- Rationale – inclusivity, modelling practice, diversifying assessments

Assessment Overview

Select two examples of educational literature (articles, chapters, policy documents etc.) and critically examine the claims made in your chosen literature in relation to your own teaching and learning context.

Each source of educational literature must represent a different type of literature, as listed below (i.e. at least two types of literature should be represented): theoretical literature, research literature, practice literature, policy literature

written form through an essay of 3000 words (+10%)

through a recorded oral presentation of 17 minutes (+10%)

- Appropriate reading and engagement with the literature
- Critical use of literature
- Reflection, insight, evaluation
- Technical accuracy

The screenshot shows a video recording interface. On the left, a woman is speaking. On the right, a document titled "My experience" is displayed. The document content includes:

- Being a supervisor:**
 - I have experienced the joy of supervision and build of personal link
 - Personal move into teaching
 - Changes over time very insightful – no experience myself
 - Keeping difficult student close – might not be same for each level of supervisor
- Supporting supervisors:**
 - Strengths and weaknesses: BSc student supervision
- Being supervised:**
 - Experience issue: supervisor forgot what it

Below the document, there is a section titled "Expectations – bring to supervisors as learning p..." with the following bullet points:

- Strengths and weaknesses
- Changing supervision over time (like the power balance etc)
- Changing academic field
 - > Changing educational field?

At the bottom left of the document, there is a note: "Auto-play is disabled in your web browser. Press play to start."

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in International Education – MA

Professor Susie Miles

Optional Formative Assignment – a 500 word article about an EDI issue of your choice for the Enabling Education Network ([EENET](#)), written in a non-academic style

Written assignment: A 3000 word analysis of an EDI issue, *or* an example of EDI in an educational policy or practice context of your **choice**

- Choose an EDI issue
- Choose a context - ideally one with which you are familiar
- Choose a framework (4 possible frameworks) which you will use to analyse the issue you have chosen
- *If appropriate*, include a short, critically reflective statement about your own personal or professional experience of this EDI issue/example

Optional 15 credit course; 150 students from a range of MA programmes; lecturers draw on examples of practice from the Global North and Global South; the majority of students enjoy writing non-academically in the formative assignment and this enhances their final assignment; lecturers are mostly excited and moved by reading students' writing; personal accounts bring originality

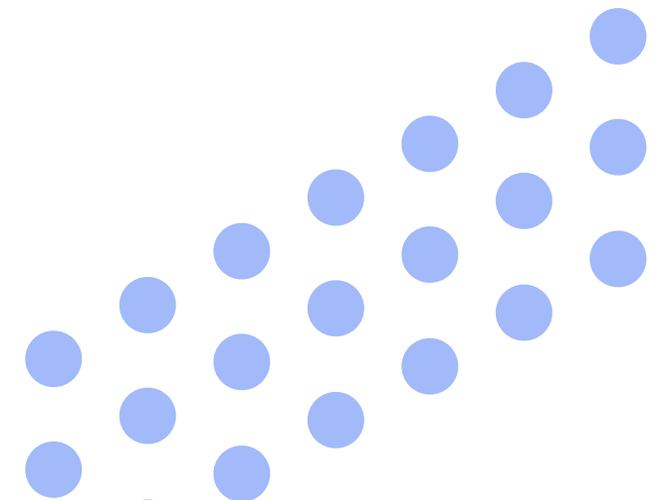


Imperial College
London

Collaborative
Enhancement Project
funded by



Q&A



Recommendations for the sector

N.	Area
1	Student motivation and engagement
2	Inclusive Assessment
3	Developing autonomy / self-directed study skills
4	Perception of fairness between different types of assessment
5	Student outcomes
6	Concerns about new / unfamiliar methods and impacts on grades
7	Impact on wellbeing / compassionate approaches
8	Links between new technologies and optionality in assessment
9	Administrative barriers / concerns about workload management



Next steps....

1. Encourage student-teacher collaboration to design assessment optionality using funding and career advancement mechanisms.
2. Sharing effective practices and examples would raise awareness and could develop staff interest and creativity thinking.
3. Engaging with sector organizations, such as NUS or AdvanceHE to promote and support sector-wide initiatives and training.

Thank you

Keep in touch via flexiblelearning@manchester.ac.uk

MANCHESTER
1824

The University of Manchester



UNIVERSITY
of York

UCL

Imperial College
London

QAA